

Introductory Notes for An Improbable Musical

Welcome to this introduction to *An Improbable Musical*, created by Improbable and directed by Lee Simpson.

The audio-described performances at The Royal and Derngate will be on Wednesday 2nd March at 7:30pm and Saturday 5th March at 2:30pm. The Saturday performance is also socially distanced. There will be a touch tour before both audio described shows. Times and details for this are to be confirmed. Introductory notes will start at 7:15 and 2:15 respectively.

The performance lasts for approximately 80 to 90 minutes with no interval.

The live audio description will be given by Ess Grange. The following introduction includes information about *An Improbable Musical*, and descriptions of the set and performers. This show introduction is also available as an MP3 from www.improbable.co.uk/current-projects/an-improbable-musical, <https://www.royalandderngate.co.uk/your-visit/access-information/> and VocalEyes.co.uk/whats-on. The recording takes about 8 minutes to listen to.

For access information for the Theatre, including their current Covid-19 protocols, <https://www.royalandderngate.co.uk/your-visit>

Please note that this show is completely improvised for every performance. It is possible that difficult subject matter might arise without prior content warnings. Some

handheld torches might be used. There will be haze and may be flashing lights and some lights pointing into the audience.

An Improbable Musical is a completely improvised show. Improbable are maestros of improvised theatre, and for three decades have created make-it-up-as-you-go-along shows that have captivated audiences across the world from off-Broadway to the National Theatre. *An Improbable Musical* might be hilarious or heart-breaking, anarchic or eerily atmospheric. The show aims to spin theatrical magic out of thin air and describes itself as essential viewing for anyone who likes their theatre as live as it gets.

An Improbable Musical takes place in the Royal Theatre space at The Royal and Derngate. The Royal auditorium is what's known as a Matcham chocolate box. Frank Matcham was famous for his ornate and beautiful Victorian theatres, and this one is no exception. There are red velvet seats, and lots of embossed plasterwork around the space. The circles and ceilings are painted in light blue and cream, and overhead an ornate centrepiece fills the ceiling. Either side of the auditorium by the stage are gorgeous royal boxes, draped with red and gold velvet curtains.

The stage is framed by a very high, but rather narrow proscenium arch that gives a 6 metre wide stage front. The arch is also painted in light blue and with floral cream embossing. At the top of the arch is a false

curtain, painted to look like flowing red velvet drapes and gold brocade.

Beyond the arch, the stage space widens to about 8 metres, and goes back a long way – the space is about 14 metres deep. The stage is quite bare, and around the sides and rear are tables holding all sorts of materials, props and puppets that might be grabbed by the performers and used as stories unfold. There are also clothes rails holding a real mix of items, from Tudor doublets to faux fur coats to everyday tracksuits or frocks.

Some of the materials used during scenes include a large very thin plastic sheet that billows and floats in the air like waves.

A long, wide sheet of special paper fabric that can act as a shadow puppet screen.

Tissue paper, brown paper and foil sheets that can crumple, rustle and float, making clouds or landscapes or magical creatures.

There are puppets with mysterious staring faces and cloth bodies that float and dance. There is also a giant bald head, big enough for a performer to get right inside of, and a pair of big hands, each about a metre long, on tall poles. These might be used with the head to create a giant, or they might appear disembodied and looming over characters.

The stage is dominated by a tall tower in the centre of the space. Built on a hexagonal base, it is about 3 metres wide and 5 metres high. The tower is made of bare wood and metal, and has a mix of steps,

staircases, ladders and levels. There is a bottom-level hidey hole with trapdoor, a mid-level platform with a ladder running straight up the middle to a top level, and through a doorway is a winding staircase running up round the outside of a wooden wall. The top level is open with light metal handrails and a metal grille floor. The wooden wall runs right up to the top, where there is a little hatch window in it, allowing performers to look through and down to us below. The tower is on a revolve, and can be turned by the performers during the show to give different faces and arrangements of stairs, wall and open space. Sometimes they revolve it mid-scene when people are performing on it, giving a sense of a journey or a scene change.

Instrumentalists are positioned to either side of the space upstage of the proscenium arch. Their instruments include keyboard, drum kit, vibraphone, cello and an array of global woodwind instruments.

Either side of the space, in front of the proscenium arch, are some stools and chairs that the performers sometimes sit on whilst waiting to join a scene.

Many characters will emerge during the performances, but we don't yet know what they will be. They are conjured and performed by:

Neill Ashdown: a white British man, quite tall and of medium build. He has dark hair that is slightly greying, and green eyes in a broad face. He is playful with a sometimes sardonic vibe, throwing the audience the odd look from time to time. Niall moves as gracefully as his

57-year old body will allow and wears check shirts, dark jeans, and trainers.

Ruth Bratt is a white woman with cropped blonde hair. She has twinkling brown eyes and often a mischievous, impish energy. Ruth is slightly below average height and of middling build, and in her early forties. She wears a petrol blue jumpsuit, or houndstooth harem pants, loose top, and black and white dance trainers.

Adam Courting is a black male of average height. He is in his early forties but looks to be in his thirties. He has shaved head and a small black beard and moustache. He is of slim build with a little belly, brown eyes, glasses, a round nose, full lips and a cheeky grin. Adam usually wears cargo pants and long-sleeved jersey shirts. His style is comfortable and casual in dark, soft greens and blues.

Janet Etuk is a tall, slender, black person in her thirties. She has long arms, huge eyes, and a bright smile, and moves with energetic curiosity. Janet has black shoulder length locks. She usually wears dungarees and comfy jumpers. Her trainers are grey with metallic shining silver details that catch the light.

Josie Lawrence is a tall white woman in her fifties, with a mid-brown bob and fringe, and hazel eyes. She has a broad smile and moves easily between serious gravitas and big, bright energy. She is usually dressed in black with flashes of blue or deep rose.

Aya Nakamura is a Japanese woman. She is very petite and of slim build. She is forty but reads as in her thirties. Her long, dark, salt and pepper hair is often tied up in a top-knot. Aya's style is casual loose clothing in darker colours, and blue boots. She moves with a fluid and dynamic physicality as she operates puppets and materials.

The musicians are:

Chris Ash, who is mostly sat at the piano. He is a slender white man with a light scattering of white stubble. His brown hair has streaks of white in it. As the musical director, Chris is frequently staring at the cast and other musicians with curiosity, intent, and sometimes joy.

Juliet Colyer is a petite white person with shoulder length light brown hair and blue eyes. She plays cello and electric cello.

Joley Cragg is a white woman with long light brown hair and brown eyes. She is always dressed in black. Joley plays percussion and vibraphone. She sits behind a drum kit, with a range of instruments including tabla and shakers.

Max Gitting is a white male with short sandy hair and glasses. He plays global woodwind instruments including bamboo flutes, shepherds flute, and panpipes.

An Improbable Musical is directed by Lee Simpson
Associate Director is Angela Clerkin
The designer is E.M. Parry
Lighting design is by Colin Grenfell
The sound designers are Oscar Thompson and Will
Thompson
Movement Direction is by Pauline Mayers
Audio Description is by Ess Grange for Improbable